Final Press Release

24th International Ecumenical Conference of Orthodox Spirituality

MARTYRDOM AND COMMUNION

Bose, 7–10 September 2016
in collaboration with the Orthodox Churches

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On Saturday, 10 September 2016, the 24th International Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox Spirituality, organized in collaboration with the Orthodox Churches and dedicated to the theme of “Martyrdom and Communion”, was concluded.

In a period marked by bloody conflicts and the suffering of innocent victims, where the way of peace is contradicted and human dignity annulled, when in many countries Christians are still marginalized and persecuted for their faith, representatives of all the Orthodox Churches, of the Churches of the Reform, of the Catholic Church, scholars, bishops, monks and nuns, Christians from the East and from the West have wished to come together, sharing their prayers and their studies, to reflect on the significance of Christian martyrdom, as a road that opens to communion and interrupts the chain of hate.

In the messages sent by the heads of Churches to the conference the intimate connection between martyrdom and communion and the basis of martyrdom in Christ was constantly brought out. Only the love lived out to its limits by Christ on the cross is the reason for the martyr’s gift of his life.

Patriarch Bartholomeos I of Constantinople in his message recalled that “the Orthodox Church has been profoundly marked by martyrdom and suffering, particularly in Asia Minor, in Russia, and more recently in the Middle East and in North Africa”, but this trial is born of a humble desire of communion, because “communion is the justification and reason of martyrdom”. Metropolitan Ilarion of Volokolamsk, president of the department for external relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, in his message, sent in the name of patriarch Kirill, noted that persecution and martyrdom stand on the horizon of those who follow Christ (cf. Jn 15,18.10; 16,2–3; 15,27) and that “the Christians of the Middle East are suffering a real genocide”. This suffering, however, is also a pressing appeal for reconciliation and unity among Christians: “These martyrs of our times, who belong to various Churches, but are united by a common suffering, are a pledge of Christian unity” (Joint declaration of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow,12).

Pope Francis joined these voices in his message through cardinal Pietro Parolin, His Holiness’s Secretary of State. He hopes that “reflection on martyrdom, a precious evangelical patrimony common to all the Churches, may dispose us to consider the special way of ecumenism by blood that precedes every contrast and reinforces the road towards unity”.

The conference, thus, hoped to illuminate the intimate tie between the testimony rendered to Christ by the martyrs and communion between the Churches in its Scriptural and patristic foundations and in the various Christian traditions of East and West.

The work of the conference opened with the inaugural speech by the prior of Bose, Enzo Bianchi, and the paper of His Beatitude Youhanna X, patriarch of Antioch, a heartfelt testimony of faith and hope of the Antiochan Church, present especially in Syria, and a pressing appeal for conversion: “The blood of martyrs, seed of communion”. The day continued with the paper of archbishop Job of Telmessos, who represents the patriarch of Constantinople at the World Council of Churches, which regarded the ecclesiological dimension of witness. In four days of study and fraternal exchanges theologians, patrologists, historians, philosophers from many countries showed the multiple implications of Christian martyrdom as a gift and testimony for the world, but also as a demanding invitation to conversion by the Churches to a way of unity and anticipation of eschatological communion.

On the final day cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, demonstrated the theological foundations of the ecumenical meaning of martyrdom. The American Orthodox theologian Aristotle Papanikolaou, co-director of the Center for Orthodox Studies of Fordham University in New York insisted on the public dimension and political implications of Christian testimony.

As the conclusions showed, the work of the conference tried to bring out the potential of community and the ecumenical horizons of Christian martyrdom, and raised important questions: when will a common martyrology be possible? The essence o Christian martyrdom is testifying to truth in love of Christ, who is the first Witness of the truth of God’s merciful

love for men (cf. Rev 3,14), with the gift of himself on the cross.

The conference concluded with thanks from the prior of Bose, Enzo Bianchi, to the delegations of all the Churches who made this meeting possible and gave it an ecumenical dimension. The delegate of patriarch Bartholomeos was metropolitan Athenagoras of Belgium; patriarch Theodoros II of Alexandria was represented by metropolitan Gennadios of Niloupolis; patriarch Youhanna X of Antioch, who was not able to come on account of the dramatic situation of his Church in Syria, was present by his paper, read by his delegate, father Porphyrios Georgi, dean of the theological faculty of Balamand. The official delegation of the Moscow Patriarchate was headed by bishop Antonij of Bogorodsk, responsible for the Russian communities in Italy, and composed of the priests Aleksej Dikarev, Kirill Kaleda, and Amvrosij Matsegora; in addition, present were hieromonk Afanasij (Bilibinskij), representing the superior of the Holy Trinity-St Sergius Lavra, and professor Andrej Mitrofanov, delegated of the rector of the Theological Academy of St Petersburg.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church was represented by metropolitan Filipp of Poltava, delegate of His beatitude metropolitan Onufrij of Kiev, and by archimandrite Nazarij (Omeljanenko) and hieromonk Panteleimon (Melnik) of the Kiev Lavra, sent by the rector of the Kiev Theological Academy. The patriarch of Serbia Irinej was represented by bishop Andrej of Austria, and patriarch Daniel of Romania by metropolitan Iosif of Central and Southern Europe.

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church was represented by father Stefan Palikarov. From the Georgian Orthodox Church present were archimandrite Adam Akhaladze, rector of the patriarchal university, and Tamara Grdzelidze, ambassador of Georgia to the Holy See.

The Archbishop of Cyprus Chrysostomos II sent bishop Grigorios of Mesaoria as his representative.

The Church of Greece was represented by delegates from various metropolies and by a group of professors from Athens and Thessalonica.

The Albanian Church was represented by bishop Asti of Bylis; the Orthodox Church of America by bishop Alexander (Golitzin); the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Italy by archimandrite Athenagoras (Fasiolo).

The delegate of the Armenian Apostolic Church was archbishop Nathan Hovhannisyan, accompanied by archimandrite Shahe Ananyan.

The Church of England was represented at the conference by bishops John Stroyan, Jonathan Goodall, and canons Hugh Wybrew and John Turner.

The World Council of Churches was represented by Manoj Kurian.

For the Catholic Church present were cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and bishops Gabriele Man, the local ordinary, archbishop Marco Arnolfo of Vercelli, Pier Giorigio Debernardi of Pinerolo, retired bishop of Ivrea Luigi Bettazzi, Juan Atonio Martinez Camino auxiliary bishop of Madrid.

As every year, there was an important presence of monks and nuns: besides those already mentioned from Russia and Ukraine, also Germany, Greece, Norway, France, Belgium, England, Turkey, and Syria, as well as Italian.

During the conference there was a presentations of the Acts of lat year’s conference, on Mercy and forgiveness.

The topic the 25th conference, which will be held in early September 2017, will be decided at the meeting of the scientific committee in October 2016.